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THE CULMINATING POINT

AND THE

38TH PARALLEL

by

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A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

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THE CULMINATING POINT AND THE 38TH PARALLEL

As he observed the debacle taking place around him, the commander of the 23rd Regimental Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, turned to his executive officer and quipped, " You are seeing a sight few have ever seen--an entire US Army Corps in rout and flight, abandoning their equipment and wounded."¹ Colonel Paul Freeman's observation near Kunu, North Korea described what was typical of the action that began when United Nations forces met over two hundred thousand Communist Chinese Forces (CCF) in late November 1950, about seventy miles south of the Yalu River. The UN had just commenced its final offensive *that began their final offensive* a few days before; the CCF *had done likewise* had done likewise. This encounter "resulted (in) one of the major decisive battles of the present century followed by the longest retreat in American history."² What was to have been the mopping-up of the last of the North Korean People's Army Peoples' Army (NKPA) that would terminate at the Yalu resulted in a humiliating defeat and subsequent withdrawal. The attacker (UN) had long since passed ^{its} his "culminating point" several miles to the south at the Thirty-Eighth Parallel.

Clausewitz warned of this possibility [to the UN forces] over a century earlier in his chapter discussing the "Culminating Point of Victory".

...this demonstrates without inconsistency how an attacker can overshoot the point at which, if he is stopped and assumed the defensive, there would still be a chance of success -- that is of equilibrium. It is therefore important to calculate this point correctly when planning the campaign.³

This paper analyses Clausewitz's culminating point and relates it to two US/UN campaigns in Korea; the campaign from Pusan to the Yalu (15 Sep - 25 Nov 50), and the subsequent US/UN offensive to the ^{DASHING} final north-south Korean border (25 Jan - 23 Jun 51). This second offensive is sometimes designated as

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two distinct campaigns -- the first one being the UN offensive that began 25 Jan 51 and halted in order to defeat the CCF Spring Offensive on 22 April; the second one being the resumption of the UN offensive that began 22 May 51 and halted on 23 Jun 51 upon cease fire negotiations. For the purpose of this analysis though, this distinction is irrelevant; Clausewitz's principles apply the same whether the final campaign is broken in two or is analysed as one campaign.

In demonstrating the validity of concepts penned over a century earlier, it shows that the UN passed its culminating point at the Thirty-Eighth Parallel in October 1950, thereby rendering the Yalu River objective unattainable. Furthermore, owing to these same concepts, the UN achieved success in securing the only attainable objective the following Spring.

Why do this analysis on the Korean War when so much has already been written about it, analyzing everything from readiness, leadership and training to national policy? After reviewing the latest version of the US Army's FM 100-5 Operations (Jun 93) and JCS Pub 3.0, Doctrine for Joint Operations (Sep 93), and reading the sections devoted to the culminating point, it is apparent that the historical relevance of these campaigns is undeniable. Historical hindsight compels this analysis because the principles that Clausewitz framed and were later adopted by the Army and the JCS are so clear as to be almost prescriptive. But in war, few things are clear. Clausewitz suggested that only superior generalship can see through the fog and "hit the mark". He summed up this challenge in his conclusion on the culminating point:

When we realize that he must hit upon all this and much more by means of his discreet judgment, as a marksman hits a target, we must admit that such an accomplishment of the human mind is no small achievement...the great majority of generals will prefer to stop well short of their objective rather than risk approaching it too closely, and why those with high courage and

an enterprising spirit will often overshoot it and so fail to attain their purpose. Only the man who can achieve great results with limited means has really hit the mark.⁴

General MacArthur overshot the target; General Ridgeway hit the mark. The validity of Clausewitz's culminating point to Twentieth Century warfare is clear.

What is the culminating point? It is the point in the attack in which the attacker's strength, physical and moral, reaches its high point--if the attacker pursues beyond this point, he loses strength.

Most (strategic attacks) only lead up to the point where the remaining strength is just enough to maintain a defense and wait for peace. Beyond that point the scale turns and the reaction follows with a force that is usually much stronger than that of the original attack.⁵

At the culminating point, the defender knows he has been defeated, even if he has not been completely disarmed. However, when the attacker passes this point, the defender grows stronger.

Clausewitz listed factors that changed the attacker's strength during his attack and consequently determined his superiority at the culminating point. He noted seven factors that increased the attacker's strength and five that decreased it. An increase in one's strength normally results in a decrease to his opponent's strength. The accumulation of these "credits" and "debits" defines the attacker's superiority.

If we remember how many factors contribute to an equation of forces, we will understand how difficult it is in some cases to determine which side has the upper hand...what matters therefore is to detect the culminating point with discriminating judgment.⁶

The analysis of each factor shows that the UN reached its culminating point in both campaigns at the 38th Parallel where its superiority was optimum.

However, their significance lies within the context of the objectives sought by the UN . Their impact made the Yalu objective unattainable and the final objective, just north of the Parallel, attainable. An overview of these objectives prefaces the examination of these factors.

When it was certain that the UN would regain the 38th Parallel in late September, the JCS authorized Mac Arthur to cross the Parallel in order to achieve his objective. "It would be necessary for American forces to overrun the whole of North Korea--right up to the Chinese and Russian borders--in order to ensure complete destruction of the NKPA."⁷ The UN objective was to close to the Yalu River, destroying all NKPA in order to unite the country by military force. This objective was unlimited in the sense that it sought the complete destruction of the enemy.

In contrast, Ridgeway chose a more limited objective in April and May 1951. His objective area was the best defensible terrain "around" the 38th Parallel. From west to east, it ran a diagonal line south of the Parallel defined by the Imjin River at Munsan, then turned north to Chorwon-Kumhwa-Pyongyang (the Iron Triangle), continued to the Hwachon Reservoir and anchored in the east at Yangyang. He believed that this line was not only the best defensible terrain but that its control would deprive the CCF of mounting offensive operations.⁸ The JCS directed that the purpose of securing this objective was to "create conditions favorable to the settlement of the Korean conflict." Clausewitz phrased this purpose similarly: "The end is either to bring the enemy to his knees or at least deprive him of some of his territory--the point in that case being not to improve the current military position but to improve one's general prospects in the war and in peace negotiations."

The following seven factors that favor the attacker affected UN strength (to varying degrees), in pursuit of either objective.

1. The defending forces suffer heavier casualties than does the attacker.

"The enemy's losses may be at their maximum directly after his defeat, and then diminish daily until the point is reached where his strength equals ours.", Clausewitz said about the attacker's first advantage.

The NKPA suffered much greater losses than the UN forces from 15-30 September, the period of the Inchon landing and Pusan breakout. This operation resulted in a rout but not a complete rout; the enemy suffered many casualties but far too many got away. In mid September the NKPA totaled about 70,000 men against about 140,000 UN troops.⁹ During the operation, as many as 30,000-40,000 NKPA escaped the series of traps the UN tried to employ in this campaign.¹⁰

"The lines and tiers thrown across South Korea to trap the NKPA were absurdly inadequate; the hard-core NKPA forces slipped away to fight again."¹¹ However, a 50% casualty rate in two weeks isn't bad, and it far exceeded UN casualties, which were about 24,000.¹²

But true to Clausewitz's appraisal, the NKPA casualty rate diminished as the UN went further north past the Parallel. Total enemy strength would eventually exceed UN strength.

Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, fell 21-23 October and in the meantime, ROK forces captured Wonson on Korea's east coast against light resistance. By the time the exploitation and pursuit began to close near the Yalu, the defender's losses were insignificant. At this point, the defender was no longer just the NKPA, but the Chinese; for when the UN crossed the Parallel, the CCF crossed the Yalu River as they said they would. By 26 November, when the CCF attacked en mass, enemy strength more than "equaled ours". As a matter

of fact, "the total enemy force facing Eighth Army numbered about 203,000, nearly twice Eighth Army's strength".¹³

Ridgeway validated Clausewitz's assessment of this factor when he approached his objective five months later. The attacker (UN) reaped maximum advantage from this factor at Pusan/Inchon and it appeared that he would again. On 30 May 1951, Ridgeway wrote:

The enemy has suffered a severe major defeat. Estimates of enemy killed in action submitted by field commanders come to total so high I cannot accept it. Nevertheless there has been inflicted a major personnel loss far exceeding in my opinion the loss suffered by the enemy in the April 22 offensive (70,000 casualties).¹⁴

However, the CCF possessed virtual unlimited manpower. They could replace casualties while still inflicting casualties on the UN forces. Ridgeway recognized that continuing his attack past this objective would be futile in terms of "enemy losses". Thus, he also recognized that he had "played-out" the advantages attributable to this factor.

2. The defender's loss of fixed assets such as "magazines, depots, bridges" is not experienced by the attacker.

"The enemy's loss of fixed assets may decrease or increase in the same way...Nowadays, incidentally, this point is no longer so important as the others.", wrote Clausewitz about the attacker's second source of gaining strength.

The UN forces heavily interdicted all fixed assets (bridges, ports, rail lines, etc.) throughout the Inchon/Pusan battle and attacked assets north of the Parallel only after 10 October.¹⁵ In advancing to the Parallel, this interdiction increased UN strength because it delayed and disrupted the NKPA along their lines of communications. In going north to the Yalu, this interdiction did not

contribute to UN strength; nor was it a factor during Ridgeway's campaign mainly because of the prohibition against bombing inside Manchuria and Russia. Besides, by the spring of 1951, all fixed assets in North Korea had either been already destroyed or the enemy had found ways to circumvent interdiction, (e.g. "underwater" fords or overnight repair of roads).

The Eighth Army suffered from its own interdiction efforts especially after it crossed the Parallel. "At every turn in the operations in North Korea during October, Eighth Army's effort was limited by an adverse logistical situation" because of the roads, bridges and rails that were destroyed during the Inchon/Pusan campaign.¹⁶ The lack of rails required more reliance on road, which were in bad shape. "The highways from Pusan to Pyongyang are open...though movement is the exception rather than the rule", reported General Mac Arthur in his Eighth Report to UN Headquarters.¹⁷ Furthermore, reliance on roads caused reliance on trucks, which caused reliance on spare parts and on and on. The logistics constraints brought on by his own interdiction efforts south of the Parallel diminished the attacker's strength when he continued past the Parallel.

Compounding this growing weaknesses was the fact that the UN did not (would not) interdict the fixed assets of the "new" defender, China. "When the battle lines moved north following the Inchon landing, however, the area of possible interdiction of such supply movements contracted until there was but left a night's march from the border sanctuaries to the area of immediate hostilities.", remarked Mac Arthur to Hugh Ballie, President of United Press on 1 December.

During Ridgeway's campaign, the Chinese fixed assets remained off limits. However, fixed assets in the south had improved considerably. FEAF continued

to interdict lines of communication in North Korea only with inconsequential results. Therefore, this factor had no appreciable impact on his strength.

In sum, the attacker (UN) never did benefit from this factor, validating Clausewitz's advice, "...this point is no longer so important as the others."

3 & 4. Loss of ground and resources and ability to live at the enemy's expense.

"Indeed one can say that it only begins to count when the attack has penetrated deep into enemy territory...the fourth advantage is also bound to increase as the advance proceeds.", wrote Clausewitz regarding the third and fourth sources of strength accruing to the attacker.

In six weeks the UN gained virtually all the Korean territory, including both capitals and the most important industrial cities, ports and key road networks. However, these gains did not increase the attacker's strength because the attacker had little time in order to take advantage of them. "...they seldom have an immediate effect on troops in action. Their work is slow and indirect. Therefore, one should not on their account make too great an effort and so place one's self in too dangerous a situation."¹⁸ The UN required more time in order for these factors to be advantageous. The CCF offensive on 26 November denied this time.

Faced with the same choice of seizing enemy real estate or securing defensible terrain and inflicting casualties on the enemy, Ridgeway chose the latter. Other considerations also mitigated against another drive to the Yalu but the UN recognized that there was little to be gained in grabbing North Korean real estate.

These factors did not add to UN strength above the Parallel and were not factors, by definition, south of it.

5. The defender loses his inner cohesion.

"The fifth advantage also begins to tell after an army has advanced some distance, and when the configuration of the enemy's country provides an opportunity to isolate certain areas from the rest."¹⁹

The NKPA was in disarray after the Inchon/Pusan operation. "For all practical purposes, the NKPA had been destroyed", wrote the US Army Historian in describing the NKPA capability in early October.²⁰ Evidence of the NKPA's break in cohesion came from Kim Il Sung himself. "Some of our officers have been cast into utter confusion by the new situation and have thrown away their weapons and left their positions without orders."²¹ It really did appear in mid to late October that the defender had disintegrated and that the attacker was about to reap the maximum benefit from this advantage. However, as noted earlier, the UN never was successful in "bagging" all the NKPA, the most hard-core and toughest of which continued to elude decisive battle. But the most important reason that this advantage didn't significantly contribute to UN strength north of the Parallel was because that by the time the UN began its final offensive, the defender was no longer the NKPA but the CCF, whose cohesion was very much intact. Furthermore, the "configuration of the enemy's country" enabled the CCF to mass undetected and consequently "isolate" UN forces from one another.

This factor did contribute to Ridgeway's ability to seize his objective in the same way it contributed to the Eighth Army's regaining the Parallel the previous October. Indeed, the CCF showed signs of disintegrating in May:

The surrender of these CCF soldiers was no isolated event. All across Eighth Army's front, CCF troops (both sick and well) were giving up in unprecedented numbers. The surrender of the able-bodied Chinese intensified speculation that the spirit of their armies had decisively cracked."²²

Notwithstanding other considerations, Ridgeway decided not to continue north in a pursuit. That the CCF would have lost total cohesion had the UN pursued is speculative; that they did before Ridgeway's culminating point validates Clausewitz's concept.

6. The defender loses allies, the attacker gains allies.

"It is probable, at all events, that the sixth and seventh advantages will increase with the advance.", is about all that Clausewitz had to say about this advantage.

When it invaded South Korea, North Korea's strongest ally was the Soviet Union. China remained neutral, perhaps not even consulted by North Korea before it invaded in June 1950. After the Inchon/Pusan operation, the Russians began to distance themselves from their North Korean allies. "By the winter of 1950, it was apparent that the Russians greatly regretted the North Korean adventure, were eager to distance themselves from it, and to prevent any widening of the war."²³ Thus at the Parallel, North Korea's major ally had deserted.

On the other hand, the UN continued to amass allies. World opinion sided with the UN mission from the beginning, as evidenced by the UN Resolution of 25 June 1950 requesting all members to "render every assistance to the United Nations."²⁴ Mac Arthur's Sixth Report to UN Headquarters commends naval forces of six nations, ground forces of five and air forces of two nations.²⁵ By 31 May 1951 fifteen nations were contributing ground forces (three of which offered medical personnel only).²⁶

The advantage of allies clearly favored the UN and increased its strength throughout the war. However, China's entry in November on the side of North Korea offset this advantage.

7. The defender becomes discouraged and disarmed.

The UN gained strength from this factor up to the 38th Parallel. The NKPA was "discouraged", and to an extent, "disarmed"; but they were still intact. Mac Arthur even called for their surrender on 1 and 9 October, but the NKPA ignored the offer.²⁷ Mac Arthur then decided to completely destroy the NKPA, seemingly unaware of Clausewitz's suggestion that "it is not possible in every war for the victor to overthrow his enemy completely".²⁸ Yet this aim was the UN's very objective. The Chinese entry modified this objective tremendously and influenced the UN to regard its enemy in more Clausewitzian terms. To completely disarm the CCF implied total war. Ridgeway recognized the implication.

The seven factors discussed above account for UN superiority at the Parallel in October 1950 and later in May 1951. Some contributed more strength than others. There were also factors that diminished UN strength; what Clausewitz described as the defender's advantages. The analysis of these factors follows.

1. The attacker must besiege, assault or observe enemy fortresses; the defender can add these forces to his main forces.

"This on its own is so debilitating to the available fighting forces that it may easily cancel out all other advantages.", Clausewitz said of this factor favoring the defender.

In the context of the Korean War, this concept translates into countering the guerrilla threat to the lines of communications (LOCs). Having to "garrison" the LOCs became an important security mission.

The Pusan breakout bypassed or isolated many NKPA troops who took refuge in the hills and countryside of South Korea where they continued to wage guerrilla warfare against the UN LOCs.²⁹ By late November, an estimated 20,000 guerrillas conducted operations in the southwest corner of Korea alone.³⁰

As the UN continued north of the Parallel, guerrilla activity shifted north and increased. For example, X Corps estimated that 25,000 guerrilla operated south and west of Hungnam in its rear areas.³¹

The Iron Triangle area of central North Korea became the focus where Clausewitz said the defender "added his units to his main forces" which, by this time, was essentially guerrilla, for it was the "principal assembly area for North Korean soldiers retreating northward".³² The guerrilla pressure never did abate. The situation became acute when the UN forces who were detailed to the security mission had to abandon it in order to join the final offensive on 24 November.³³

Initially, the UN "besieged" the threats to its LOC's by assigning the security mission to IX Corps, comprised of two US divisions, an ROK division and eventually a couple of Ranger Battalions.³⁴ In his Ninth Report, Mac Arthur stated that:

nearly 30% of the United Nations troops in Korea are employed against them (guerrillas).... From 1-21 November, there were nearly 200 guerrilla raids and attacks, most of which required the immediate attention of the anti-guerrilla forces.³⁵

The necessity to protect its LOCs from guerrillas caused the UN to lose strength during its advance north. If a "single important place has to be formally besieged or starved out, it will call for a small army", said Clausewitz. These "important places" did call for small armies, the IX Corps being the initial one and up to "30%" of the total force later.

By the following April, the LOCs were secure. However, had Ridgway opted to launch an offensive beyond his objective near the Parallel, he would have faced a similar guerrilla threat to his LOCs. He did not continue north though

and hence did not experience this degradation to his strength. Conversely, the enemy did not gain strength from this factor.

2. Establishment of a theater of operations in enemy territory.

"Every army has strategic flanks...LOCs...the further the advance, the longer these flanks become, and the risks they represent will progressively increase; so unless it started with exceptional superiority, it will find its freedom of action dwindling and its offensive power progressively reduced.", said Clausewitz about the second source of weakening.

In venturing into hostile territory, the UN forces lost strength because they were doing just what the defender wanted them to do. In his book, On The Protracted War (1938), Mao wrote that, "We have always advocated the policy of luring the enemy to penetrate deep precisely because that is the most effective military policy for a weak army in strategic defense against a strong army."³⁶ The UN complied with Mao's strategy and got weaker as a result.

Ridgeway was aware of Mao's strategy. His campaign to recapture the Parallel contrasted sharply with Mac Arthur's that left units isolated at the tips of long flanks extending deep into enemy territory. On 16 April, during Eighth Army's offensive to extend its objective area north of the Parallel:

the enemy continued to withdraw, the Army advance was 'practically unopposed' and the enemy continued to employ weak forces in his normal elastic type of defense.... This did not, however, lessen the caution of UN forces in their advance... that the enemy was going to attack was a foregone conclusion.³⁷

Ridgeway emphasized to General Van Fleet, the Eighth Army commander, that "acquisition of terrain in itself is of little or no value" and that he may even be ordered at any time to withdraw to defensive positions and defend indefinitely.³⁸ Deliberate, "shoulder to shoulder" maneuver characterized the UN's Spring offensive. Once on the objective, battalion size outposts remained within

supporting distance of their main body. Ridgeway anticipated two major CCF counter offensives during this period and successfully shifted to the defense when they occurred. He did not allow this "cause of weakening" to affect his army.

3. Distance from source of supply.

"In this respect a conquering army is like the light of a lamp; as the oil that feeds in sinks and draws away from the focus, the light diminishes until at last it goes out altogether.", said Clausewitz.

The further the Eighth Army went from the 38th Parallel, the further it moved from its source of supplies. The paucity of decent roads in the north compounded this problem though command of sea and air allowed for some resupply through these means.

As the UN went further from its logistical sources, the army got closer to his own. Units at the 38th Parallel had reasonable supply lines; those near the Yalu had over-extended supply line. Clay Blair summed up the situation as follows:

The strategic positions of the Eighth Army and the NKPA were now exactly reversed from positions of early September...Eighth Army was hobbled by an overextended supply line. Inchon...could provide only a fraction of the required tonnage. Because the railroad bridges over the Han, Imjin and Taedong rivers were not yet in place, the bulk of Eighth Army's supplies still had to come by rail/truck, truck or emergency airlift from Pusan. What finally came out of the spout at the Chongchon River was a trickle.³⁹

Ironically, General Mac Arthur himself described eloquently the relationship of one's source of supply to the culminating point. Soon after Eighth Army had recrossed the Han River on 7 March 1951 in its northward move, he released the following communiqué:

Our selection of the Battle Area, furthermore, has forced him into the military advantage of fighting far from his base and permitted greater employment of our air and sea arms against which he has little defense. There has been resultant continuing and exhausting attrition upon both his manpower and supplies.... In such a campaign of maneuver, as our battle lines shift north, the supply position of the enemy will progressively improve...the battle lines cannot fail in time to reach a point of theoretical military stalemate. Thereafter our further advance would militarily benefit the enemy more than it would ourselves.⁴⁰

The irony of Mac Arthur's communiqué is in its timing; he failed to make this observation or frame the relationship in September or October. Ridgway recognized this relationship and denied this third cause of weakening to affect his army. On 14 June 1951, he cabled the JCS:

Enemy lines of communication are over-extended. His supply situation is aggravated by heavy rainfall and air interdiction. provided no general advance north of Kansas-Wyoming line (final objective) is made during this period, logistic support of Eighth Army will remain adequate. A general advance north of the Kansas-Wyoming area would tend to nullify Eighth Army's present logistical advantage over the enemy.⁴¹

4. The change in political alignment.

"If on the other hand, the defeated state is smaller, protectors will appear much sooner if its very existence is threatened. Others who may have helped to endanger it will detach themselves if they believe that the success is becoming too great." This quote from Clausewitz precisely describes what in fact happened in October 1950.

Before they crossed the 38th Parallel, UN forces faced only the NKPA. *See Map*
After crossing it, they faced the Chinese as well. Clausewitz suggested that the intervention of an ally would make an "infinite difference to the plans that one can and must make in war".

Why the Chinese intervened, either from fear or out of concern for North Korea's existence, is not as important as the fact that they said they would intervene and then did so. They announced on 3 October that if the UN forces penetrated the Parallel (ROK forces were permitted) they would intervene.⁴² They broadcast their intentions again on 10 October and finally crossed the Yalu on 15 October.⁴³ They first fought US forces on 1 November in a brief but bloody encounter with 1st Cavalry Division. The US/UN continued to focus only on the NKPA and ignored the new ally. At the 38th parallel, the UN was superior to the NKPA; at the Yalu, they were not superior to the Chinese.

When the UN again approached the Parallel five months later, Chinese intervention was a fact of life. Although the Russians had "detached themselves" some months earlier, Ridgeway still considered the possibility of their intervention. He knew it would make an "infinite difference to the plans that one can and must make in war."

On 31 May, the JCS cabled instructions to Ridgeway that dealt with the possibility of Russian intervention:

In response to Ridgeway's repeatedly voiced concern about possible Soviet intervention in Korea, the language of the directive was more specific than the language of NSC-48/5. It specified:

- In event of open or covert employment of major Soviet units in Korea (including "volunteers") you will, subject to the security of your forces, assume the defensive, make no move to aggravate the situation, and report to the JCS...
- If the USSR announces in advance its intentions to reoccupy North Korea and gives warning either explicitly or implicitly that their forces should not be attacked, you will refer the matter immediately to the JCS.
- In the event of an attempt to employ small Soviet units covertly in Korea, you should continue your current action.⁴⁴

It is apparent that the JCS/UN learned their lesson concerning this cause of weakening. Ridgeway was not about to repeat Mac Arthur's mistake; the UN did not lose strength due to this factor in the spring/summer of 1951.

5. The increased resistance aroused in the enemy.

"Further, one should be conscious of the slackening effort that not infrequently occurs on the part of the victor after the danger has been overcome, and when, on the contrary, fresh efforts are called for to follow up the victory." Clausewitz warned of overconfidence and carelessness.

This last cause of weakening is important not so much because the impending doom caused the defender to fight harder, but because the attacker became complacent in his final phase of the offensive. The following passage describes the complacency that permeated the Eighth Army just prior to the final UN offensive near the Yalu:

A tabulation in one infantry company was typical: All but 12 of 129 had thrown away their steel helmets, preferring to wear warm pile caps. Only 2 men--new arrivals-- had bayonets. About half the men had discarded entrenching tools for digging foxholes. All were acutely short of grenades and ammo; an average of less than one grenade per man; as few as sixteen to thirty rounds per rifle and carbine.⁴⁵

Ridgeway best described the general lack of capability that this complacency bred when he later discussed his misgivings about the final offensive. They reveal his awareness of the UN's diminished strength:

It is difficult to justify his (Mac Arthur's) plans and orders in the face that all that was known about the enemy's strength, his own supply situation, the terrain and the manner in which his own troops were dispersed--even had they been equipped at full strength, which was far from the case.⁴⁶

This fifth factor contributed significantly to the UN weakness near the Yalu.

In contrast, the soldiers of the Eighth Army who achieved their final objectives five months later did not demonstrate any signs of complacency;

The divisions inched forward warily for several thousand more yards. By 14 June all four (divisions) had reached Piledriver objectives on the line Wyoming...All units dug in, erected bunkers, strung miles of barbed wire, planted tens of thousands of mines, and zeroed in artillery. Behind them, engineers and Korean laborers continued to reinforce line Kansas, should another withdrawal become necessary.⁴⁷

All five of Clausewitz's factors that favor the defender weakened the UN after it crossed the 38th Parallel in October and advanced northward. None of these factors diminished UN strength during its subsequent campaign to retake the area around the Parallel in the Spring of 1951.

All twelve factors (seven favoring the attacker and five favoring the defender) illustrate that UN forces reached their culminating point at the 38th Parallel and grew weaker in going past it. Where Ridgeway had the same opportunity four to six months later to "blow" past his culminating point, he halted around defensible terrain and assumed the defense. The analysis of these factor convincingly argue the relevance and timelessness of his concept of the culminating point to Twentieth Century warfare.

Clausewitz makes one other important point about the interrelationship among the defense, the campaign plan and the culminating point. The Korean War illustrates his point in almost textbook fashion.

The natural goal of all campaigns, therefore, is the turning point on which attack becomes defense...so long as the attack progresses there must still be some superiority on its side; further, that since defense (the more effective form of war) must start when the advance ends, one may not really be in much danger of imperceptibly becoming the weaker side. Yet that is what happens.⁴⁸

It happens because when the attacker stops at his apex deep in enemy territory he no longer enjoys the natural advantages that the defense offers. Clausewitz listed these advantages as:

1. The utilization of terrain.
2. The possession of an organized theater of operations.
3. The support of the population.
4. The advantage of being on the waiting side.⁴⁹

Except for terrain, Clausewitz believed that the attacker loses all these advantages when he transitions to the defense after offensive exhaustion.

None of these factors favored the UN forces near the Yalu, especially terrain. "The terrain was ghastly; hill upon hill, most snow covered and divided by narrow gorges and defiles. There were few roads, none in some sectors."⁵⁰ There was no organized theater of operations so far north mainly because of poor infrastructure and lack of time. The population became refugees whose sole aim was to try and get out of the way of fighting. The surprise attack by the CCF denied the UN the advantage of being on the waiting side. "A defense is far more provocative in character when it is undertaken in occupied territory than it is in one's own."⁵¹ Most importantly though, it is clear that Mac Arthur never envisioned a turning point in which his attack would transition to defense. His talk of a "buffer zone" at the Chinese-Korean border was bombastic and superficial. His purpose was to totally destroy the NKPA and unify the country of Korea. He never did transition to defense.

Without imposing restrictions on recrossing the Parallel, Ridgeway's purpose for the UN operations was clear in the spring of 1951. "The Truman administration policy, to which Ridgeway subscribed, was to hold Eighth Army roughly along the 38th Parallel and seek a negotiated settlement."⁵²

This purpose naturally dictated that there be a turning point at which attack became defense. Ridgeway made this point his objective area that encompassed the defensible terrain "along" the 38th Parallel. Some of the terrain ran south of the Parallel; some north of it.

When the UN forces finally secured their objective, they enjoyed all four of Clausewitz's advantages. The terrain was good. The area below the Parallel had developed into an ever improving theater of operations; the south Korean population provided manpower in preparing positions and moving supplies; and Eighth Army had the advantage of being on the waiting side.

In summary, the analysis of the culminating point has shown that the UN forces passed it in October 1950 at the 38th Parallel and halted at it in the spring of 1951. The factors that determine the culminating point rendered Mac Arthur's objective unattainable; Ridgeway's attainable. Clausewitz prescribed these relationships over a century earlier. All the major players in the Korean War (Mac Arthur, Ridgeway, et al) provided a practical 20th century demonstration of the validity of Clausewitz's concepts.

- 1 Smith, Robert, Mac Arthur in Korea, The Naked Emporer, pp.114.
- 2 Marshall, S.L.A., The River and The Gauntlet, p.1.
- 3 Clausewitz, Carl, On War, p.571.
- 4 Ibid, 573.
- 5 Ibid, 528.
- 6 Ibid
- 7 Blair, Clay, The Forgotten War, p. 351.
- 8 Ibid
- 9 Hastings, Max, The Korean War, p.103.
- 10 Appelman, Roy E., South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu, p. 603.
- 11 Blair, 555.
- 12 Appelman, 606.
- 13 Blair, 431.
- 14 Ibid, 900.
- 15 Whiting, Allen S., China Crosses the Yalu, The decision to Enter the Korean War, p. 72.
- 16 Appelman, p. 640.
- 17 Senate, Compilation of Certain Published Information on the Military Situation in the Far East, p. 80, 81.
- 18 Clausewitz, p. 567, 568.
- 19 Ibid
- 20 Appelman, p. 604.
- 21 Ibid, 630.
- 22 Blair, 891.
- 23 Hastings, p. 121.
- 24 Senate, p. 5.
- 25 Ibid, 60.
- 26 Blair, 901.
- 27 Appelman, p. 609.
- 28 Clausewitz, p. 566.
- 29 Appelman, p. 603.
- 30 Ibid, 722.
- 31 Ibid, 726.
- 32 Ibid, 727.
- 33 Ibid, 728.
- 34 Ibid, 717.
- 35 Senate, p. 81.
- 36 Whiting, p. 133.
- 37 Blair, 814.
- 38 Ibid, 819.
- 39 Ibid, 368.
- 40 Ibid, 743.
- 41 Ibid, 918.
- 42 Appelman, p. 758.
- 43 Whiting, p. 118.
- 44 Blair, p. 909.
- 45 Ibid, 431.
- 46 Smith, p. 100, 101.
- 47 Blair, 916.
- 48 Clausewitz, 570, 571.
- 49 Ibid
- 50 Blair, p. 430.
- 51 Clausewitz, p. 571.
- 52 Blair, p. 819.

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